

What is This Guy Up To – And Why?

A sermon by

The Rev. Bryan Jessup

The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Chalice Lighting

The Chalice Lighting Words today – are inspired by Kenneth Patton –

Our Fellowship is a house for the ingathering of nature and human nature. It is a house of friendship and encouragement as we grow our minds and hearts together. It is place where we listen to one another deeply and are free to be ourselves.

Our Fellowship is a place where scientists sit beside mystics and meditators sit beside social justice advocates. It's a house wherein we each sit with our own deepest selves and call ourselves to work for justice and call ourselves to center all our justice work in wisdom and love.

This house is the cradle of our dreams and the workshop of our common endeavors. Let us enter it with joy and gratitude and humility.

Words of Reflection – Now hear these words of reflection... inspired by the poet Adrienne Rich who says we sometimes think we should make of our lives an orderly study as if we were learning natural history or music. We sometimes think that we should be able to begin with the simple exercises and then slowly go on to the harder ones. -

But we don't live like that.

We instead find that we have to take on everything all at once before we've even begun to keep time or read music.

We find we're thrown into life in the midst of a very complex, flowing movement – and we have to learn as we go along.

So as we do our learning, may love, patience and wisdom be with us – and may we be with one another in courage and in mutual understanding.

May we be grounded in and focused on the ends we intend to serve. And even when the immediate outcomes of our efforts are far from perfect – let us keep faith with our own deepest values and with one another as life-long learners.

For this is how we will be blessed – be a blessing to others – and in truth be able to say: Blessed be!!! And Amen!

Reading

As you know I am one of the Co-Presidents of your Fellowship Board, and the theme for our work as Board this year is “Healing the Heart of Our Fellowship.” The Board chose that theme not because we think the Fellowship is ill – but because the healing work of coming together in mutual understanding is the foundation for everything we do. We hope our chosen theme helps us remember that we always need to listen to and understand one another

Our new minister, Bryan, mentioned last Sunday that one of the reasons we need to listen so carefully is because our lives are very complex. Part of the complexity that faces us as a Fellowship is that we can only afford to fund a minister half time. That being said, we as a Fellowship need to be clear about what we would most like him to do.

So your Board and Minister have created a Memorandum of Understanding. Bryan will be working with us half time – approximately 24 hours per week. He will work with us to clarify our Fellowship’s vision, mission and ends. His primary areas of responsibility will be Program and Worship, Adult Religious Education, Membership and Pastoral Care.

That, of course, does not mean that he does not care about other parts of our ministry and Fellowship. Nor does it mean that we do not wish we could use him more. It just means, this is all we can reasonably expect him to do in 24 hours per week.

He will be available, of course, by appointment, for individual meetings and pastoral care. He will meet with and work with the Board. He will visit folks in the hospital and perform weddings, memorials and child namings as needed. Please don’t hesitate to call him when you need a pastoral listening ear.

We cannot expect him to do everything – but our glass is half full! And clarity and mutual understanding of what he’s up to and what we are up to are big part of “Healing the Heart of Our Fellowship.” – Working together with Bryan, may our healing deepen and continue throughout this year and for a long time to come.

Sermon: What is This Guy Up To – And Why?

I want to thank Richard for being the Worship Associate for today's service – and I want to thank him and Kim Moor and David Harris and the Board for working with me to create the Memorandum of Understanding between us regarding what my work as your Contract Minister Serving Half Time will involve.

Power and decision making and money are things we all need to be clear about in our lives. – Particularly in voluntary organizations where not just paid employees - but everyone works so hard and deals so often with situations with no easy answers.

It's good to know what we expect of one another. And it's good to keep in constant communication about how things are going because – as you and I know – life is complicated.

So Richard shared with you this morning that the Board's and my plan is to have my half time efforts focus on working with you to clarify the Fellowship's vision, mission and ends. He noted that I will be working specifically with Program and Worship, with Adult Religious Education, with Membership, Pastoral Care and the Board.

It's a little more complicated than that, of course, because the vision, mission and ends of the Fellowship are inter-related with every aspect of the Fellowship's life. And it's a little more complicated because I will, of course, be available for hospital visits, pastoral listening and support, weddings, child namings and memorials. Do not hesitate to call and set up an appointment.

To my areas of responsibility well in 24 hours a week will be a challenge. Once I'm here and settled, I really am I'm going to try to limit myself to something like. I'm working about 30 hours a week now and in a month or two the Board and I will have conversations about what is most important and what I need to let slide.

This kind of clear conversation about expectations and limits is not just limited to contract ministers and boards is it? It is important for all our relationships.

Eddie and I have to work all the time to clarify expectations and affirm commitments. We're doing pretty well at it. We've had a lot of practice. But frankly, since, since starting work with the Fellowship in mid August – Fellowship members have not been the only people who've wondered "Who is this guy – and What is he up to – and Why?"

Eddie's been asking that too.

The other night I asked her “Do you feel kind of abandoned here in our new home?” – And she said, she knows better but – Yes. She does feel a little bit abandoned.

Then - using all my Arnold Swarzenegger charm I assured her “I’ll be back!”

I breathed a sigh of relief. My “settling in” is working for us for right now. But I know the clock is ticking.

I share this story because whatever we do in our personal lives, or work or in our religious communities – we need to be clear with one another and sensitive to one another. We need to be in communication about what’s working and to what’s not working.

Memorandums of Understanding are important – but they are just the first step. To be effective, they have to be followed up with living moments of understanding. So the question is not just – “What is this guy up to?” – But “How is he going to treat us as he goes about his business?”

We Unitarian Universalists have some precedent for “how” in our religious tradition. We are Protestants – who, along with the intrepid Martin Luther – affirm the priesthood of all believers. So the relationship between clergy and lay people is a relationship between equal children of God or equal children in the web of life.

Clergy have a special role – but that role is “to serve.” That’s what ministry means – “to serve.” And in Protestant churches the official minister serves to support and empower the lay people to “minister to” their own deepest humanity, to the humanity of all those around them – and to the health and well being of the world.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister and your brother human being – that’s what I hope to do with you – support and empower you to minister to your own hearts and minds – and to one another – and to the world.

So your Board has contracted with me for a year to work with you in the areas that we’ve named in the Memorandum of Understanding. But, you may well ask, **why?** **Why** did the Board structure the minister’s time this way?

And the answer, I would say, is because you as a congregation have done some significant self examination over the years and your Board has paid attention to it.

One form that self examination took was a Congregational Assessment you did with Unitarian Universalist Association Consultant Mary Gleason in 2011. The report on that process is on your Fellowship Website if you’d like to see it again.

Some of the suggestions that Mary came up with were:

That you work to hire a professional minister who might stay with you a while.

That you focus on clarifying your vision and mission and ends.

That, as you focus on your ends, you begin to expand the number of people you serve – that is... you grow your membership.

Can you begin to see why your Board and I have agreed to focus my work in the areas outlined in our Memorandum?

I want to point out that the approach of getting some really good, independent, outside counsel – is not just good for growing congregations. It's a good technique for growing our own spirits and for growing our own relationships.

Of course I'm not saying you always have to seek counsel, but I will let you know that good counsel has often been really helpful for me.

In my life, I have been blessed with really great counselors and consultants. I've been blessed with people of wisdom and compassion who have traveled with me out to my growing edge and have stood by me as I've considered the chaos of my life. I've been blessed with counselors who have offered me some very fine resources and then said – OK, Bryan. Now it's up to you to create your response.

Mary Gleason left your Board with that challenge two years ago – and the members of your Board have not ignored it. Clearly, they have worked to establish what we all hope will be a stable relationship with a professional minister.

And then they've asked me to work with you on deepening and clarifying your vision mission and ends.

On the front of the order of service today is a picture of people working together to dig a foundation for a church. They happen to be students from Dakota Wesleyan University – the alma mater of George McGovern. Those students understand and are learning more about the importance of having everything they do rest on a deep foundation of everlasting values. Though those students' religious language may be somewhat different from ours – they know that their religion saves lives. They know it is vital to their well being and to the world.

We Unitarian Universalists know that too – but we often need to be reminded. Our lives are so complex – there is so much nuance – and we are often so sheltered and protected from storms of life that we sometimes forget what we are really about.

In the broadest terms what we Unitarian Universalists are really about is three things:

We're about growing and transforming our minds and hearts toward a deeper and deeper level of humanity.

We're about creating a supportive, nurturing welcoming community as we work toward that growth.

And we are about helping to create a world that is kinder, more just, healthier, more peaceful and more in harmony with ways of life that will allow our species and many other life forms to survive.

I'm here to help you remember your foundation, folks. I'm here to remind you of all the powerful statements of our UU faith at large – and the powerful statements you in the Humboldt UU Fellowship have crafted on your own.

Sure I am going to work with you on Program and Worship and I am going to work with you on Adult Religious Education. Sure, I am going to work with you on growing your membership and growing your financial support of your Fellowship – but not just because we need more members and more money to survive. That would be a pretty shallow reason to ask anyone to join any organization.

I am going to work with you to keep deepening your worship and education and to keep expanding your membership - by helping you realize who you truly are – what you have already done – and what you need to do to effectively share our healing UU message with the world.

Oh come on – some people may say. Aren't you being a little over dramatic?

Well let me tell you a story.

In one church I served, go figure, there was a rather grouchy, opinionated older lady. She lived alone. Her kids were grown. She had a circle of church friends and she had her piano which she played as a spiritual practice and her life was pretty OK.

She hadn't been out of her comfort zone for quite a while.

After one of my sermons about the "life-saving" power of Unitarian Universalism she said – "Oh Bryan, you're making such a big deal out of it."

I said – Yeah. I know. I'm excitable. But tell me your story. Tell me how you got into Unitarian Universalism.

And she told me about being raised by very strict, narrow minded evangelical parents. She told me about her philandering husband whom she divorced when her kids were small. She told me about wanting to raise her children with good values but without narrow minded guilt inducing religion. She told me about finding the UU church and how well it responded to her needs both spiritually and in a material way during this troubled time in her life – and how ever since that time, besides her kids and grandkids, her church friends were the most important people in her life.

So – I told her – that’s what I mean. That’s what Unitarian Universalism does for people. It saves our ordinary lives. And I think it’s absolutely vital that we keep developing it and offering it to other folks.

She then said – I know, Bryan. I just get distracted sometimes and forget. - -

When I was still in seminary in Berkeley – one of the grouchy old men at the UU Church there cornered me. I was young at the time and he said – “What do you think a youngster like you could ever tell an old guy like me that I don’t already know?”

“Nothing” I said. “Nothing. But together – maybe you and I can both remember something that we’ve already forgotten.”

That’s why I’m here in Humboldt now folks. So you and I can keep remembering something we too often forget.

The business of religion is saving lives and saving our humanity. It is building healthy, welcoming religious community - and saving our planet.

And our Unitarian Universalist way in religion is a tremendous tool for attending to that very business.

Extinguishing the Chalice and Closing Words –

These Closing Words are inspired by the Rev. Theodore Parker –

May ours be a religion like sunlight that flows everywhere.

May our temple be this earth and the whole universe.

And may its shrine be the compassionate heart.

Through our authentic living – may people know our courage.

Through our deeds of caring – may they know our love.

And through our relentless efforts for healing our world – may they know our faith.

Now as we go – may we go in peace.